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### Citation for published version:

Taylor, B 2008, 'Musical History and Self-Consciousness in Mendelssohn's Octet, Op. 20', *19th-Century Music*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 131-59. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncm.2008.32.2.131>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1525/ncm.2008.32.2.131](https://doi.org/10.1525/ncm.2008.32.2.131)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### Published In:

19th-Century Music

### Publisher Rights Statement:

Taylor, B. (2008). Musical History and Self-Consciousness in Mendelssohn's Octet, Op. 20. *19th-Century Music*, 32(2), 131-59.

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Source: *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2008), pp. 131-159

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncm.2008.32.2.131>

Accessed: 19/02/2014 04:24

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# Musical History and Self-Consciousness in Mendelssohn's Octet, Op. 20

BENEDICT TAYLOR

Genieße mäßig Füll und Segen!  
Vernunft sei überall zugegen,  
Wo Leben sich des Lebens freut!  
Dann ist Vergangenheit beständig,  
Das Künftige voraus lebendig,  
Der Augenblick ist Ewigkeit.  
—Goethe, *Vermächtnis*

Toward the end of the finale of Mendelssohn's Octet for Strings in E♭ Major, op. 20, the musical past becomes increasingly drawn into the present. Reminiscences of earlier movements are heard fleetingly amid the seemingly irrepressible drive of the music to its final measures. In the central developmental section of this movement's irregular structure, the theme

of the quicksilver third-movement scherzo is caught three times, always in a new key, but it is never securely held—and then “all has vanished.”<sup>1</sup> The climactic coda, the apotheosis of the whole composition, unfurls in a series of three increasingly explicit references to the music of the first and second movements. The process begins with a passage that, strangely familiar yet unlike anything previously heard in the finale, manages to allude unmistakably to the opening Allegro moderato without ever quite quoting it. There follows a distant echo

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“Enjoy in measure fullness and blessing! / Let reason be present everywhere, / Where life delights in life! / Then the past is still abiding, / The future lives on before us, / The moment is eternity.” The epigraph is from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Vermächtnis* (“Kein Wesen kann zu nichts zerfallen!”), strophe 5, in *Poetische Werke: Vollständige Ausgabe*, 10 vols. (n.p.: Phaidon [2006]), I, 442.

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<sup>1</sup>Literally, “turned to dust.” Goethe, *Faust* I, l. 4398 (*Walpurgisnachtstraum*), in *Poetische Werke*, V, 230.

of the crisis—the insistent repeated half notes and the C- and F-minor tonal areas—that had befallen the first movement’s development section and whose darker hues had also spilled out to form the slow movement. Finally, the irresistible drive of this section culminates with the explicit reappearance of the closing theme of the Allegro over the pulsating eighth notes of the finale’s own closing theme. The finale and opening movement have closed and merged into one another, tying up the work with a return full-circle in an ecstatic meeting of parts and whole. The entire composition has turned round on itself to form a single, interconnected organic system, which has grown away from itself only in order to grow into itself again. Beginning and end, first and last, are one and the same: “It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual.”<sup>2</sup>

If reception history is anything to go by (which admittedly in Mendelssohn’s case is not always the best course), the Octet occupies a pivotal position within its composer’s oeuvre. Robert Schumann, who hailed the work for its “consummate perfection,” recounts how the Octet remained Mendelssohn’s favorite among the pieces of his youth.<sup>3</sup> Judging by its subsequent reception, this work, along with the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that followed barely a year later, has become emblematic of a popular image of Mendelssohn that is as limited in scope as it is enduring. This Octet is celebrated as the miraculous product of a teenage prodigy who at sixteen finds his mature voice. It thus helps sustain the myth of the young Mendelssohn emerging from nowhere as a fully formed genius like a musical Minerva. As John Horton expressed it, in a phrase that has been imitated and paraphrased countless times, “not even Mozart or Schubert accom-

plished at the age of 16 anything quite so accomplished as this major work of chamber music.”<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding Spohr’s series of “Double quartets,” which the elder composer was quick to point out were in any way different in concept from Mendelssohn’s work, the Octet, as the first—and so far the only really successful—composition for eight strings, effectively created a genre of which it is both the originator and sole surviving member.<sup>5</sup> Its third movement has provided (for better or worse) the embodiment of the iconically deft and mercurial Mendelssohn scherzo.

Significantly for the present study, the Octet is also one of the first and most important compositions in cyclic form. The cyclic recall of parts of the work’s earlier movements across the course of the finale is both a groundbreaking new formal paradigm and the climax of the work’s expressive journey. The Octet provides an important model for the paradigmatic “plot” of an instrumental work that would be used countless times following Mendelssohn. It displays the ceaseless onward drive of the archetypally heroic Beethovenian model, but it simultaneously subsumes the past within its course. Indeed, the goal of the work seems to be the melding of the past and the present. This process can, I believe, be applied usefully as a musical expression of views of time and history prominent during the early nineteenth century and represented notably by two of Mendelssohn’s most important mentors, Goethe and Hegel. This article approaches the Octet from the standpoint of its cyclic formal design and offers readings of the work from the perspective of these two leading figures of German culture.

<sup>2</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Schumann, “Aufzeichnungen über Mendelssohn,” in *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn, *Musik-Konzepte* 14/15 (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 1980), p. 107.

<sup>4</sup>John Horton, *The Chamber Music of Mendelssohn* (London: G. Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 60. Horton’s formulation perhaps owes something to Schumann’s in his *Erinnerungen*: “He wrote the Octet in his 15th [sic] year. No master of the past or present can boast such consummate perfection at such an early age” (“Aufzeichnungen über Mendelssohn,” p. 107).

<sup>5</sup>Examples of later works following Mendelssohn’s model include the Octets of Niels Gade (op. 17, 1848), Johan Svendsen (op. 3, 1866), Joachim Raff (op. 176, 1872), Woldemar Bargiel (op. 15a, 1877), George Enescu (op. 7, 1900), Reinhold Gliere (op. 5, 1900), and Max Bruch (op. post., 1920). The Gade and Enescu Octets in particular are notable works deserving a wider appreciation.

This approach will lead to the creation of a new model for understanding cyclic form by relating it to ideas of subjectivity, memory, time, and history that are also of major importance to much of the later cyclic music of the century.

MUSICAL MEMORY  
AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS:  
"THE CIRCUITOUS JOURNEY"

"For beginning and end on the circumference of a circle are the same."<sup>6</sup> In its recall of past music, the Octet's large-scale cyclic trajectory may be understood to constitute a form of musical self-consciousness—the music's apparent ability to reflect on its own history, akin to what Michael Steinberg has called musical "subjectivity."<sup>7</sup> Previous themes are heard returning in later stages of the work as if they were memories arising from within the consciousness of the music, a process prefigured in several of Beethoven's cyclic designs, including those of the Ninth Symphony, the Piano Sonata, op. 101, and the Cello and Piano Sonata, op. 102, no. 1.<sup>8</sup> Most notable here is the Fifth Symphony, which in the recall of its third movement within the finale is often viewed as an immediate precedent for the Octet.<sup>9</sup> What is new about Mendelssohn's process—the respect to which he takes this model significantly fur-

ther—is that the telos of his work is formed out of the realization of these memories. In Beethoven's examples the recalled past almost uniformly forms a preface to the finale (or in the Fifth Symphony, a shock intruding midway through it), but in Mendelssohn's work the cyclic recall—the articulation of the music's self-consciousness—is the goal to which the entire composition has been striving.<sup>10</sup> The telos is formed out of the synthesis of past and present.

This paradigm would become definitive for later music: the cyclic model established by Mendelssohn in this work would become perhaps the most common type in the next century.<sup>11</sup> By recalling the past movements toward the end of the finale, binding the work's separate parts into one, Mendelssohn creates a design that would be taken up and imitated from Schumann, Brahms, and Franck to Bruckner, Tchaikovsky, Elgar, and Mahler. To overstate the case mildly, it is hard to find a large-scale instrumental work from the end of the Romantic era that does not, in some way, incorporate a brief reminiscence of, or passing allusion to, one of its earlier movements as it nears its conclusion.

The prevalence of the cyclical design in later music points not just to the influence of this one piece by Mendelssohn but to a deeper affinity between the times and this formal idea. The design is particularly fascinating for its resonances with a structure that became especially prevalent in literature and philosophy at the time and remained potent well into the twentieth century. This circular structure, which M. H. Abrams calls "the Circuitous Journey," permeates the writings of contemporary poets and philosophers and underlies many of their conceptions of time and history. Abrams out-

<sup>6</sup>Heraclitus, *The Cosmic Fragment*, Diels-Kranz fragment B. 103, in *Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Barnes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 72.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 4–11.

<sup>8</sup>See, for instance, Elaine Sisman, "Memory and Invention at the Threshold of Beethoven's Late Style," in *Beethoven and His World*, ed. Scott Burnham and Michael Steinberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 51–87.

<sup>9</sup>The Octet parallels Beethoven's work directly in the return of its scherzo within the finale's development, though in Mendelssohn this is just the first in a succession of instances of cyclic recall. An important distinction between the two works is that Beethoven's (like his Piano Sonata, op. 110 and Mendelssohn's own Piano Sextet of the preceding year) is an example of what I have termed "disruptive" or "non-integrative" cyclicism, differing in function and effect from the Octet's "integrative" procedure (*Cyclic Forms in the Instrumental Music of Felix Mendelssohn: Time, Memory and Musical History* [Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 2006], pp. 10–12 and 26–27). Haydn's Symphony No. 46 and Dittersdorf's Symphony in A, K. 119, are closer (if probably unknown) precedents.

<sup>10</sup>The Beethoven work that provides an *end*-orientated cyclic recall is the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, whose design approaches most clearly the developments of Mendelssohn and the later Romantics. On the cyclic qualities of this work, see Christopher Reynolds in "The Representational Impulse in Late Beethoven, I: *An die ferne Geliebte*," *Acta musicologica* 60 (1988), 43–61.

<sup>11</sup>For Charles Rosen, for instance, this work of Mendelssohn provided the "supreme model" for many of the later experiments in cyclical form. "Only rarely," however, "was a similarly convincing simplicity achieved" (Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* [London: Harper Collins, 1996], pp. 90–92).

lines several of these conceptions (almost every one may be seen to be shared by Mendelssohn's Octet): (1) a self-moving and self-sustaining system; (2) immanent teleology; (3) unity lost and unity regained; (4) progress by reversion—the Romantic spiral; (5) redemption as progressive self-education; (6) the spiral journey back home.<sup>12</sup>

Famous examples of this circular journey are, according to Abrams, found in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, and, in the twentieth century, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The beginning of the work is the end, but we realize this only at the end, which is reached through the coming to self-consciousness during the journey to get there. Indeed, the end can be reached only through this realization of the journey it has taken.

Mendelssohn's Octet may be seen as an innovative musical expression of the notions of time and historical consciousness that sponsored the trope of the Circuitous Journey and the associated figures that recur throughout the Romantic era: the retrospective recapitulation of a history as a necessary step toward the attainment of a final goal and the recapitulation of the past as a means of progressing into the future.<sup>13</sup> As Goethe claimed, "One cannot understand the present without knowing the past, and the relationship between the two."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 172–95.

<sup>13</sup>For example, see Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. James Baron Robertson (London: Bohn, 1846), Lecture 18, esp. pp. 446–47, where the future is to be formed from a regeneration of the past. Hegel's philosophy, it has often been claimed, was spurred by the failure of radical modernism as seen in the French Revolution and by the consequent need for continuity with the past. Both Schlegel and Hegel were closely connected with Mendelssohn: the former was his uncle by marriage, the latter a frequent guest of the Mendelssohn household in the 1820s and Mendelssohn's philosophy lecturer at university.

<sup>14</sup>Goethe, *Italianische Reise*, bk. 1, 25 January 1787, in *Poetische Werke*, IX, 211. See further on this point, John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness, or the Remembered Past* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); and John Edward Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

This historical self-consciousness is one of the defining characteristics of Mendelssohn's age and a fundamental category of what may be termed "modernity."<sup>15</sup> Mendelssohn was perhaps the first to articulate fully this modern conception of subjectivity and historical self-consciousness in music, and the Octet is the first work in which this project is carried out.

Of all Abrams's examples, perhaps the most promising parallel here is Hegel. The young Mendelssohn knew the philosopher personally, and later, as a student at the University of Berlin, he attended Hegel's lectures on aesthetics.<sup>16</sup> Even before this period of study, it would hardly be surprising to find close affinities between certain aspects of Mendelssohn's work and the world and ethos of Hegel and Hegelianism. Mendelssohn, without doubt highly intelligent, was probably the most deeply cultured and widely read composer in history. The grandson of the "Jewish Socrates," Moses Mendelssohn, and "the spiritual heir" of the humanist tradition of Goethe and classical Weimar, Mendelssohn in his grasp of philosophy and the classics was far beyond the level of

<sup>15</sup>From the establishment of museums and national galleries, the preservation of early artifacts and paintings, unprecedented philological concern with ancient sources, the Gothic revival, and neo-Classical trends in architecture and visual arts, the early nineteenth century witnessed an unparalleled interest in the works of the past. In music, the decades after 1820 saw the Bach revival and the invention of the modern musical canon, in both of which Mendelssohn played a pivotal role. Other examples of this historical tendency include the Palestrina revival in music and the Nazarene movement in art (one of whose most important figures, Philipp Veit, was Mendelssohn's cousin). See Walter Wiora, *Die Ausbreitung des Historismus über die Musik: Aufsätze und Diskussionen* (Regensburg: Bosse, 1969); James Garratt, *Palestrina and the German Romantic Imagination: Interpreting Historicism in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and more generally, Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne, 1995); and Susan Crane, *Collecting and Historical Consciousness in Early Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup>This semester was during the winter 1828–29; Mendelssohn's notes for these lectures still exist, though they are currently in private hands and scholars have not been given the chance to study them in detail.



any comparable musician of the age.<sup>17</sup> (At the age of eleven he took to writing mock-Homeric epics; Goethe later commented with approval on the boy's translation of Latin authors. At the time of the Octet Mendelssohn was busy translating one of the seminal texts of classical aesthetics, Horace's *Ars Poetica*.) Although Mendelssohn was hardly an uncritical follower of Hegel, he could not fail to take on board aspects of Hegel's outlook while growing up in the heady cultural milieu of 1820s Berlin—even if it is fair to assume that he would have been unlikely to conceive a musical work as an embodiment of Hegel's philosophy. As Scott Burnham remarks, in 1820s Berlin, everybody was “a Hegelian.”<sup>18</sup>

The closest analogy for Mendelssohn's design appears in Hegel's celebrated *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. In the central portion here I will take up this Hegelian angle to demonstrate how numerous features of Mendelssohn's Octet, and the approach to history and time evinced by them, form remarkable parallels with Hegel's famous work of 1807 and with the Hegelian system more generally. Hegel, however, is not Mendelssohn's only personal acquaintance with whose work the Octet forms notable correspondences. In true dialectical fashion and after much valuable insight, when taken to an extreme the connection between Mendelssohn and Hegel inevitably falters, at which point the figure of Goethe, waiting patiently in the wings, will step forward. Thus the Octet affords us a chance to explore two of Mendelssohn's extraordinary personal connections and the importance they may have for his musical aesthetic.

## THE OCTET AS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT

BENEDICT  
TAYLOR  
Mendelssohn's  
Octet, Op. 20

The basic premise of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and indeed his entire philosophy, to which the former was designed as a prolegomenon, is the notion of history as a necessary self-sustaining process tracing the coming to self-consciousness of an idea (namely Spirit or *Geist*) over time. “History is nothing other than the consciousness of the idea of freedom,” as he was to contend later in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. “The history of the world is this evolutionary course and coming to realization of the spirit.”<sup>19</sup> The structure of Hegel's philosophy is a circle, or more precisely a spiral, moving out dialectically from an initial unity through contradiction and returning to a recognition and awareness of the self: “Only this self-restoring sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself . . . is the True.”<sup>20</sup> Or, as formulated in the *Logic*: “Advance is the retreat into the ground, to what is primary and true. . . . The essential requirement for the science of logic is not so much that the beginning be a pure immediacy, but rather that the whole of the science be within itself a circle in which the first is also the last and the last is also the first. . . . The line of scientific advance thus becomes a circle.”<sup>21</sup>

Within this system, art is a mode occupied by spirit en route to the Absolute, a form or a mode of consciousness in which spirit reflects on itself. Art is a manifestation of the Idea in sensuous form; its category of Beauty arises out of the convergence of the sensuous and the ideal (“the pure appearance of the Idea to sense”).<sup>22</sup> Following Kant's demand that the work of art, to be considered as such, must be an end in itself, complete and self-contained—

<sup>17</sup>John E. Toews, “Musical Historicism and the Transcendental Foundation of Community: Mendelssohn's *Lobgesang* and the ‘Christian German’ Cultural Politics of Frederick William IV,” in *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics, and the Psyche*, ed. Michael S. Roth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 183.

<sup>18</sup>Scott Burnham, “Criticism, Faith, and the *Idee*: A. B. Marx's Early Reception of Beethoven,” this journal 13 (1990), 187. A useful survey of early-nineteenth-century musical culture in Berlin is given in *Studien zur Musikgeschichte Berlins im frühen 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Regensburg: Bosse, 1980).

<sup>19</sup>Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 456–57.

<sup>20</sup>Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup>Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), pp. 71–72.

<sup>22</sup>Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I, 111.

to be “purposive yet without purpose”<sup>23</sup>—the artwork must, for Hegel, embody the qualities of self-sustaining inner teleology and organic wholeness. Or, to be more precise, the *modern* artwork must *seek* these qualities; for Hegel understands art, as he does everything else, in historical terms.

The Hegelian notion of a self-generating organic system, coming to self-knowledge at its end through the recollection of its own history in a circular or spiral journey, is strongly reminiscent of the process in Mendelssohn’s Octet and later in the Piano Sonata, op. 6, and the String Quartet, op. 13. John Toews has accordingly characterized Mendelssohn’s music in quasi-Hegelian terms as the unfolding of an idea over time. Especially in Mendelssohn’s early cyclic works, unity is provided “by the recognizable continuity of a pre-given musical subject through a series of transformative variations or episodes,” a process in which the musical theme or idea evolves toward “full self-disclosure.”<sup>24</sup> The subject is initially given in “undeveloped or not fully interpreted form,” the process of the music being to reveal the subject “as the hidden identity tying together its various movements.”<sup>25</sup> In Mendelssohn’s work, one could say, spirit has found a way of reflecting on itself, enacting its own coming-to-self-consciousness within the work of art.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meridith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 162–67.

<sup>24</sup>John Toews, “Musical Historicism and the Transcendental Foundation of Community,” pp. 186–90; also cf. p. 185: “In Mendelssohn’s idealized conception . . . sensuous materials and virtuosic techniques were subordinated as means for the representation of the musical ‘idea,’ and the effectiveness of musical composition and performance was judged by their ability to moralize or edify the audience, to elevate individual listeners into the unity and spirituality of the ‘idea.’”

<sup>25</sup>Toews, *Becoming Historical*, p. 230. Much of Toews’s technical substantiation is taken from Krummacker’s. Following Krummacker’s lead, Toews perhaps exaggerates the departure from “traditional” thematic dualism in Mendelssohn’s music or, conversely, overstates the case for the music of Beethoven and others being unreservedly “dualistic” in relation to Mendelssohn’s.

<sup>26</sup>On the role of the “Idea” in the theory of A. B. Marx and its relation to Hegel and Mendelssohn, see Arno Forchert, “Adolf Bernhard Marx und seine ‘Berliner Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung,’” in *Studien zur Musikgeschichte Berlins im frühen 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Regensburg: Bosse, 1980), pp. 381–404.

The Octet operates like a large interconnected organic system embodying its own internal teleology and generative process. The large-scale recall of music from past movements in the course of the finale is only the clearest manifestation of the interconnection of all four movements in this work, an ideal toward which Mendelssohn had been working in his compositions of the previous year, for example, the B-Minor Piano Quartet. This relationship of “all 4, 3, 2 or 1 movement(s) of a sonata to each other and their respective parts”<sup>27</sup> that Mendelssohn set as one of his compositional principles is manifested in a process of “organic” development and growth that occurs both within the movements and at a higher level across the multimovement structure of the composition. (Organicism, I emphasize, is here understood as a particular historical ideal that explicitly informed the work of Mendelssohn, Goethe, and Hegel, not simply as a reflection of the dominant twentieth-century analytical paradigm.<sup>28</sup>)

Without delving too deeply into the construction of the first three movements, some discussion of these earlier stages of the Octet is useful in establishing the nature of the “or-

<sup>27</sup>Mendelssohn, letter of 22 April 1828 to Adolf Lindblad, in L. Dahlgren, *Bref till Adolf Fredrik Lindblad från Mendelssohn och andra* (Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1913), p. 20.

<sup>28</sup>The notion of musical organicism—and the related concept of thematic growth and unity—is of course a problematic one in modern musical scholarship. See, for instance, Ruth Solie, “The Living Work: Organicism and Musical Analysis,” this journal 4 (1980), 147–56; Lotte Thaler, *Organische Form in der Musiktheorie des 19. und beginnenden 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Musikverlag E. Katzschichler, 1984); David L. Montgomery, “The Myth of Organicism: From Bad Science to Great Art,” *Musical Quarterly* 76 (1992), 17–66; or Severine Neff, “Schoenberg and Goethe: Organicism and Analysis,” in *Music Theory and the Exploration of the Past*, ed. Christopher Hatch and David Bernstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 409–33. This should not, however, be taken to imply that the idea is foreign to Mendelssohn’s music; as the composer’s statement above shows, the relationship of whole to parts and the unfolding and growth of musical material—“so that one must already know, from the simple beginning, throughout the entire existence of such a piece, the secret that is in the music” (Dahlgren, *Bref till Adolf Fredrik Lindblad*, p. 20)—was a conscious effort on his part. Mendelssohn’s historical situation and his close friendship with such keen advocates of organicism as Goethe indicate just how central this notion is to his compositional aesthetic.



First Group							Second Group							Closing	
1.1		1.2		1.1		1.2		2		2					
a	b			a	b			a	b	a	b	(1.2) (1.1a) (2a)			
m. 1	9	21	37	45	52	59	68	75	77	84	88	93	113	127	
E♭		V/f	E♭	V/f f	V/g	g	V/B♭	B♭	V/g	G	V/c	V/A♭	g	V/B♭	B♭

Figure 1: Thematic and harmonic structure of op. 20, movt. I, exposition.

ganic system" that will find its consummation in the cyclic recall of the finale. The following analytical section charts the organic growth of material across the Octet.

#### CYCLIC DESIGN AND THE ORGANIC GROWTH OF MATERIAL ACROSS THE OCTET: FIRST MOVEMENT

For Friedhelm Krummacher, the thematic process of the first movement's exposition represents the first time Mendelssohn comes close to the ideal of organicism that is a notable characteristic of his mature music.<sup>29</sup> Both thematically and harmonically, this opening movement reveals a continual process of growth from its opening phrase that indeed justifies the analogy with the aesthetic ideal of organic unity claimed by several commentators. The exposition is built on a double-period construction of its two main subject groups, a design that contributes greatly to the unusually broad scale of the movement (fig. 1). (In its scope and breadth the movement immediately asks to be set beside another work in E $\flat$ , the first movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony, an analogy that, as we will see, is not just incidental.)

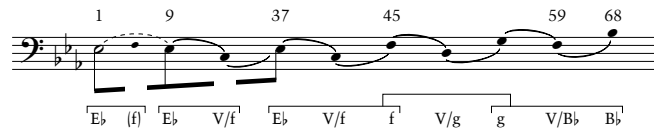
The two main periods of the first group (mm. 1–20 and 21–37, each split into two asymmetrical parts) are immediately repeated (mm. 37–59). This repetition, however, is far from an exact replication of the proceeding music. The exposition is formed from an ever-increasing

series of harmonic waves expanding out by step from the tonic E $\flat$ . The supertonic, F minor, implied by the harmonic sequence of the opening theme (mm. 1–4 to mm. 5–7) is more strongly suggested by the V/ii at m. 25. On the return to the first period (m. 37), the passing movement to ii is more strongly articulated, establishing V/F minor for the consequent five measures (41–45). The second phrase of the first theme (m. 45) is now given in F minor. This new tonality is used in turn as the starting point for another expansion up a step to V/G minor for the reiteration of the second period (m. 52), which leads to a sustained dominant pedal of B $\flat$  (mm. 59–67) in preparation for the second group.

The second group shows a parallel construction to the first, offering an immediate repetition in G of its initial phrase and thus returning to the tonality of the preceding section (mm. 52–57) and transforming it into the major. This G major then moves, via C minor, to a temporary A $\flat$  (m. 86), which, however, proves unstable and leads eventually to the confirmation of V/V for the closing theme (B $\flat$ , m. 113). C minor, the relative minor comparatively absent from the exposition, will become in turn the focus of the first part of the development. In short, we are presented with a series of overlapping harmonic expansions up a step of ever-increasing scale, which become progressively more firmly established (ex. 1).

Greg Vitercik has likened this pattern to "the vision of organic growth Goethe had propounded in [his] *Metamorphose der Pflanzen* [1790], in which the development of a plant is held to reveal the progressive transformation of a single, fundamental cell." "It is not . . . unreasonable," he continues, "to find evidence of Goethe's influence in the structural organiza-

<sup>29</sup>"Erstmals aber gelingt es, eine Vermittlung zwischen den Themenkreisen zu schaffen, die Mendelssohns späterem Ideal des 'Organischen' nahekommt" (Friedhelm Krummacher, *Mendelssohn—der Komponist: Studien zur Kammermusik für Streicher* [Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1978], p. 156).



Example 1: Mendelssohn, Octet in E $\flat$  Major for Strings, op. 20  
(*Leipziger Ausgabe der Werke von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, Gesamtausgabe, series 3, vol. 5, ed. Ralf Wehner [Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel, 2003]).  
Harmonic structure of exposition, opening.

First motivic group (opening subject)



Second motivic group (second subject)



Example 2: First and second thematic families, movt. I, archetypal versions.

tion of the composer's first fully mature work."<sup>30</sup>

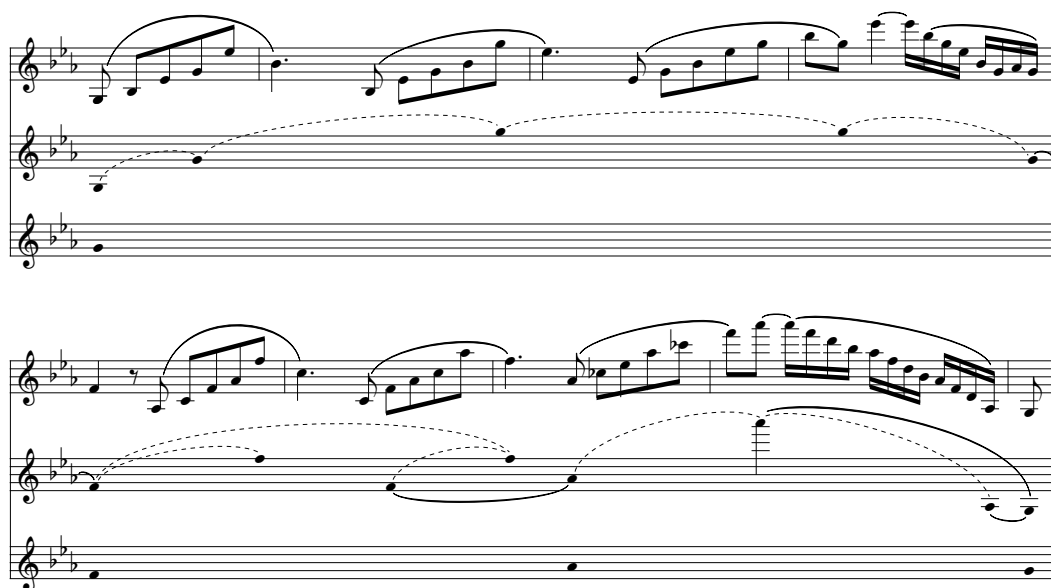
Complementary to this harmonic procedure is the dense process of thematic manipulation, juxtaposition, and development present across the exposition. Thematically, much of the material of the movement relates back to just two main families of musical ideas, which may be described in their ideal form as an ascending arpeggiated figure, typified by the opening theme, and a turning motive passing by conjunct step, found in its reply (m. 12) and used as the movement's second subject (ex. 2). So basic are these two different motives that it is tempting to view them as examples of the Goethean *ideale Pflazentypus*—an abstract, ideal type that is not physically present but that lies behind all the representations generated from it, much like a Platonic Idea or Schoenbergian *Grundgestalt*. Elements from both these families of ideas intercross within each theme group, forming contrasts, juxtapositions, and latent relationships. Furthermore, both families derive from the same source—the very opening mea-

sures of the Octet. As R. Larry Todd has demonstrated, the arpeggiated opening theme, soaring from the first violin's low g up and over three octaves to a $\flat^3$ , conceals what is essentially a four-note turning figure, the underlying voice-leading being reducible to the neighbor-note prolongation of scale-degree  $\hat{3}$ , G–F–A $\flat$ –G (ex. 3).<sup>31</sup>

This subthematic motive may be seen to generate innumerable related figures across the course not only of the exposition but indeed of all four movements of the work. The winding motive (mm. 12–13) that follows the answer to the first phrase clearly incorporates this neighbor-note turning figure into what is essentially a  $\hat{1}\text{--}\hat{2}\text{--}\hat{3}$  ascent barely hidden by the octave displacement of the final G (ex. 4a). In the consequent phrase, this figure is sequenced out across

<sup>30</sup>Greg Vitercik, *The Early Works of Felix Mendelssohn: A Study in the Romantic Sonata Style* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), p. 75.

<sup>31</sup>R. Larry Todd, *The Instrumental Music of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Selected Studies Based on Primary Sources* (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1979), pp. 291–92. The same figure is explicit in the upper voice of the theme's accompaniment in the second violin. This particular neighbor-note background figure may be related to an archetypal "changing note" schema ( $\hat{3}\text{--}\hat{2} \dots \hat{4}\text{--}\hat{3}$ ) identified by Leonard B. Meyer among others and treated at length by Robert O. Gjerdingen in *A Classic Turn of Phrase: Music and the Psychology of Convention* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), esp. pp. 55ff.



Example 3: Derivation of second ("turn") family from opening theme, movt. I.

b motive

a. 12

b. 16

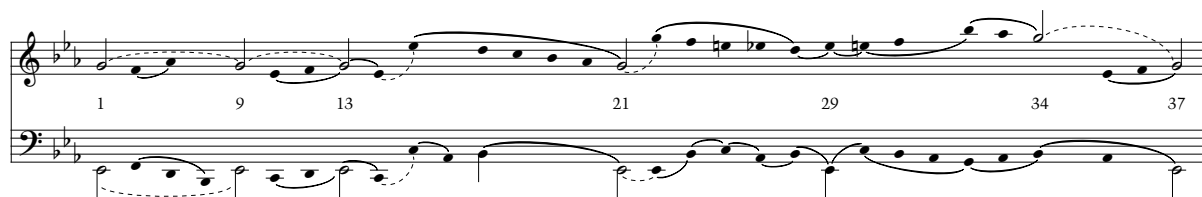
c. 21

d. 24

e. 68 Second subject

f. 73

Example 4: Variants of second family of motives, movt. I.



Example 5: Reduction of exposition, opening group, movt. I.

four measures into a linear progression moving in tenths with the bass from  $e\flat^2$  up an octave to  $e\flat^3$  (ex. 4b). The legato phrase (mm. 22–23, ex. 4c) that answers the transformation of the opening arpeggios into sixteenth notes in m. 21 is both the inversion of this previous  $\hat{1}\text{--}\hat{2}\text{--}\hat{3}$  ascent and a further transformation of the neighbor-note turn of the subthematic motive. This is immediately followed by a closely derived figure in sixteenth notes (m. 25, ex. 4d), which retrospectively links the arpeggiated sixteenth-note pattern of m. 21 with the turn-family of motives.

At the cadence of the second period (m. 36) the three-note ascent  $\hat{1}\text{--}\hat{2}\text{--}\hat{3}$  is heard once again. Throughout the opening pages of the Octet, clear cadential endings are continually undercut by the predilection for ending phrases on degree  $\hat{3}$  in the upper voice. In Schenkerian terms, the middleground of the first subject group may be read as prolonging this  $\hat{3}$ , starting from the first sonority of the piece—the throbbing measured tremolo with  $g^1$  in violin II—and the first note of the melody line in the first violin ( $g$ ), through the weak first perfect cadence of m. 9 (again with  $G$  in both upper parts), the momentary cadence of m. 13, and the melodic close of m. 21 (violins I and II, ex. 5).

The importance of this procedure lies in the life and sense of incompleteness with which it endows the movement; although the formal architectonic construction of phrases remains intact, the articulation of musical paragraphs is undercut, as if the flow of the music were continuing unabated across the ends of musical phrases, ever pressing on. This open-ended quality is a much-remarked-upon feature of Beethoven's "heroic" style; here Mendelssohn imbues his work with a similar quality of forward

striving that Scott Burnham has read as a mark of the *Goethezeit*, or age of Hegel.<sup>32</sup>

The second subject is a further variant of the turning motive, a conjunct winding figure that unfurls from its pedal  $B\flat$  and returns back to it again. This idea, whose second half is merely a rhythmically altered repetition of the first, changes via successive statements into a pendant phrase (mm. 75–77) that is both a modification of the second theme's second half and equivalent to this theme's inversion (ex. 4e and f). Much of the movement's seemingly "a-thematic" material—particularly, the extraordinary sixteenth-note scale passage in all eight voices that forms the celebrated retransition recapitulation, plus numerous similar passages of apparently standard passagework—may be considered to grow from this group of motives.

The first group, the arpeggiated family that grows from the opening theme, exhibits a comparable process of development and modification (ex. 6). The first theme is continued in the bass of m. 9 in a new variant that emphasizes degree  $\hat{6}$ , treated as an appoggiatura to  $\hat{5}$ , which will form an important feature later in the work (ex. 6b). This figure will be inverted when these measures are reiterated in F minor at m. 45 (ex. 6c). The new sixteenth-note figure of m. 21 is, as suggested, a further derivative of the opening motive, articulating an  $E\flat$  arpeggio now confined to a single octave (ex. 6d). Most memorably, the opening theme provides the basis for the exposition's closing theme (mm. 113–27, ex. 6e), to be recalled—in a further transformation—at the close of the work.

<sup>32</sup>Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 112–46.



Example 6: Variants of first family of motives, movt. I.



Example 7: Relationship between tail of second subject and first subject theme, movt. I.

As Krummacker has indicated, though, the relationship between themes is not just one of static juxtaposition; it involves the forming of new connections between themes that had at one stage seemed unrelated.<sup>33</sup> The continuation of the second period of the second subject is a noteworthy example. The sixteenth-note figure of the first group's second period (m. 21) had appeared more closely related to the arpeggiated motive than to the turning figure. However, after the pendant to the second theme has continued at m. 84, the sixteenth-note motive enters in inversion, continuing the melodic sequence initiated by the preceding theme (m. 88, ex. 7). The two figures—the first drawn openly from the second subject and conjunct in motion, the second derived from the first theme and fundamentally arpeggiated save for one passing note—are revealed as interchangeable, es-

tablishing a connection between the first subject and the arpeggiated family of motives and the second theme.

In this imposing opening movement, Mendelssohn is clearly emulating Beethoven's achievement, above all in the *Eroica*, via the dynamic internal teleology and continual growth, contrast, opposition, and subsequent revealing of latent relationships between two basic subthematic concepts. (For many writers this feature of Beethoven's music has proved attractive as a musical presentation of a process often considered "Hegelian," although this view is not without its problems.<sup>34</sup>) In this way,

<sup>33</sup>Krummacker, *Mendelssohn—der Komponist*, p. 302.

<sup>34</sup>For one of the most celebrated proponents of this view, "Beethoven's music is Hegelian philosophy" (Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedermann, trans. E. Jephcott [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998], p. 14, my emphasis). The literature on Beethoven and Hegel is prodigious: see, for instance, Christopher Ballantine, "Beethoven, Hegel and Marx," *Musical Review* 33 (1972), 34–46; Janet Schmalfeldt, "Form as the Process

Mendelssohn is taking up the teleological drive associated with Beethoven's "heroic" style; he will go beyond this model in the subsequent extensive thematic connections he establishes between movements, which fuse this linear momentum with a broader circular movement resulting in a spiral trajectory that is quintessentially Hegelian, even Goethean.

This process of "organic" unfolding and development, both thematic and harmonic, is followed in each of the following movements. As Greg Vitercik has shown, the second theme of the third-movement scherzo grows almost imperceptibly from a tiny detail of the first theme—the B $\flat$  of m. 4.<sup>35</sup> David Montgomery has described the second movement, Andante, as an exceptional case of organicism in which the larger form of the movement seems to be foreshadowed in a "complex motivic prototype based upon an abstraction of Goethe's luxurious super-plant."<sup>36</sup> More specifically pertinent for this study, many details of the Andante stem from the first-movement material, thus forming the first link in the work's nexus of cyclic interconnections.

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of Becoming: The Beethoven-Hegelian Tradition and the 'Tempest' Sonata," in *Beethoven Forum*, ed. Lewis Lockwood and James Webster, vol. IV (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 37–71; Reinhold Brinckmann, "In the Time(s) of the 'Eroica,'" in *Beethoven and His World*, pp. 1–26, and numerous writings of Carl Dahlhaus.

This view can be problematic: as Stephen Rumph has rightly argued, it is mistaken to connect the notion of an irresistible linear teleology to Hegelian views of history, and the notion of an evolving organic system is hardly unique to Hegel (Rumph, *Beethoven After Napoleon: Political Romanticism in the Late Works* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004], pp. 212–20). The idea of a continuous, unilinear teleological progression might adequately characterize mid-eighteenth-century views of history and historical progress—as crystallized, for instance, by French materialists like La Mettrie and Turgot—but it is a poor match for the post-revolutionary theories of thinkers like Hegel. In this sense, Beethoven's "heroic" works could be thought of as perpetuating an outdated—indeed predominantly French—eighteenth-century ideal, vainly sustaining an already-doomed revolutionary hope throughout the Napoleonic era. A more nuanced reading of this music's "Hegelian" qualities is given by Scott Burnham in *Beethoven Hero*, pp. 121–24.

<sup>35</sup>Greg Vitercik, "Mendelssohn the Progressive," *Journal of Musicological Research* 8 (1989), 335–54.

<sup>36</sup>David L. Montgomery, "The Myth of Organicism: From Bad Science to Great Art," p. 26.

## THEMATIC CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MOVEMENTS—THE ANDANTE AND FIRST MOVEMENT

The development section of the first movement represents a crisis point. After the exposition's closing theme has continued across the double bar, a transition (ex. 6b) leads to a vehement statement of part of the first subject's second period, transformed in a new C-minor context (m. 137). While the rushing sixteenth notes in the lower parts are recognizable, the double-dotted descending arpeggio in the treble and repeated quarter notes seem less familiar. It is only when this two-measure unit is repeated at m. 139 that we realize that these three quarter notes, heard off the beat and now outlining a descending third, form a version of the lyrical reply to this sixteenth-note figure in m. 22 (cf. ex. 8 with ex. 4c, p. 139). Moving from C minor via a diminished seventh implying V<sup>7</sup> of F minor, the passage ascends in a series of movements up a fourth to B $\flat$ , which soon collapses to a six-four of D $\flat$  major. This key is only transitory, though, and the music soon returns to C major, understood as V of the evident goal of F minor (m. 147). The quarter-note figure is gradually liquidated, a forlorn hint of a new theme glides over in the first violin, and then the music settles on F minor for a statement of the second subject's theme (m. 164). This climax, having reached a climactic impasse on a dissonant minor ninth and subsequently disintegrated in trudging quarter notes, unmistakably echoes that in the development section of the *Eroica* Symphony. More important, however, is the material from this *aporia* in the first movement, which spills out to become the starting point of the slow movement.

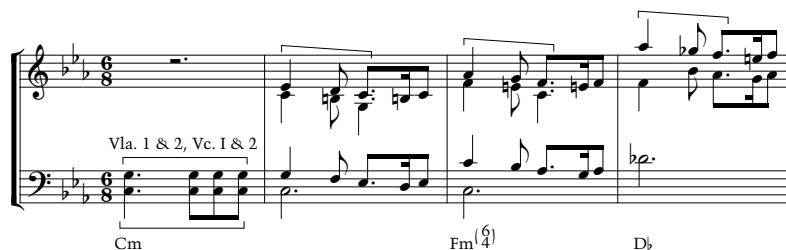
The Andante's opening measures derive in two respects from the development section of the first movement (ex. 9). Starting from an empty fifth that reveals itself in m. 2 to belong to C minor, the repeated eighth-note figure on the last three beats of m. 1 is a further metamorphosis of the hammering quarter notes of the first movement, while the theme that enters in m. 2 is made up of the same descending third that went with this rhythm.

In this manner, the development's material





Example 8: Climax of first movement development section.



Example 9: Start of Andante movement.

separates into its constituent rhythmic and thematic elements in the Andante. Furthermore, in harmonic layout, the Andante's opening section closely follows that of its development. After its initial presentation in m. 2 the Siciliano theme is repeated immediately in sequence on the subdominant, F minor, but then, miraculously, its  $A\flat$  is taken up in m. 4 by the violins, which, entering for the first time, reinterpret the note as  $\hat{5}$  of  $D\flat$  major. Within the space of its opening four measures the movement passes from C minor via F minor to  $D\flat$  major, where it remains for the next twelve measures. The remarkable tonal latitude opened up by the slow movement is almost exactly that traced in the preceding movement's development section, which has already served as the source of its thematic content.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup>The connection between the two movements was further clarified by Mendelssohn in his 1832 revision of the Octet prior to publication; in the original 1825 version the start of the first movement's development had returned to a statement of the first theme in the tonic before moving to G minor for the equivalent of m. 137. By excising these measures Mendelssohn downplayed the more literal parallel between the events in the development and those in the exposition, but simultaneously avoided an unnecessary reduplication of the first theme and tautened the section's harmonic progression, making the relation of this passage to the slow movement even more apparent.

The progression of the work thus far is somewhat akin, then, to a dialectical process—or stated in Goethean terms, a process of *Polarität und Steigerung* (opposition and enhancement)—in which an initial statement gives way to its contradiction. The first movement's exposition gives rise to its Other, the C-minor-dominated development section, which is taken up at a larger level in the second movement: "The other side of its Becoming, *History*, is a *conscious*, self-mediating process—Spirit emptied out into Time; but this externalization, this kenosis, is equally an externalization of itself; the negative is the negative of itself."<sup>38</sup>

The subtle tonal disjunction found in the center of the work, between the second movement and the scherzo (a Phrygian cadence in C heard as V/F minor, followed instead by G minor), forms a type of dialectical step up. The scherzo and finale will similarly exist in a complementary relation to each other, the former subsumed into the latter across its course. Finally, the movement of the whole will turn back into itself in the finale's coda, which brings again the music of the first and

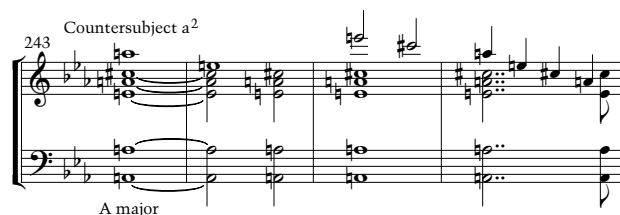
<sup>38</sup>Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 492.

second movements at a higher level. In this movement the threads interlaced across the entire work are recalled and bound up together in a synthesis of the preceding parts that looks beyond any prior model and prefigures virtually all future attempts at cyclicism.

The finale is, as Krummacher has argued, the first irregular structure of Mendelssohn's œuvre.<sup>39</sup> Nearly all of the material is given at the start in a thematic complex consisting of four main elements (a, b, c, and d, ex. 10). Although each of the four ideas is clearly distinct, all nevertheless share common features:

the rising fourth of b is taken from the immediately preceding answer of a, which is heard continuing underneath; the rhythm and phrase-structure of c are virtually identical to those of the statement of b that c completes; and d returns obviously to the eighth notes of a, outlining a new, cadential-sounding harmonic progression.

144



Example 11: Finale, countersubject ( $a^2$ ).

In short, it is not immediately obvious that a large final-movement structure can be created from just these four distinctive motives. The following section (mm. 63–189) consists merely of a strophic variation of the first that moves to the dominant and thus functions as the second half of the exposition.

What the movement really needs is the injection of new material to sustain it for longer than the 190-odd measures taken to reach its secondary area. This need for fresh thematic substance will be fulfilled by way of the reintroduction of elements from past movements. To put it simply, the cyclic recall in the Octet's finale is motivated by the immanent demands of the movement; the return of past music completes the vacant potential of the finale's own thematic material. The nature of the opening thematic complex is thus intrinsically related to the finale's form: the movement *demand*s the introduction of further, "new" melodic material.

The exposition has indeed hinted at this relationship to music previously heard, prefiguring the process of the coda that will be formed from the increasingly unambiguous recall of these past ideas. Theme a, as Todd suggests, recalls the second subject of the first movement, and both themes a and b demonstrate affinities to the scherzo—the former, to its sixteenth-note accompanimental figure, the latter, to the rising-fourth head-motive of the scherzo's main theme.<sup>40</sup> The twice-heard cadence to B $\flat$  toward the end of the exposition outlines a plagal cadence familiar as a characteristic sonority from movement I (mm. 34–37), preceded by a winding chromatic line in

quarter notes that further recalls that movement's coda (mm. 137–45 and 149–65). Later in the development section, a *fortissimo* statement of a new countersubject ( $a^2$ ) seems to offer a distant echo of the first movement's development in its strident rhythm and descending arpeggiation (m. 243, ex. 11).

The first explicit instance of cyclic recall is the appearance of the scherzo theme at m. 273. Though its material had been prepared by the rising fourth of theme a immediately preceding it and by the accompanimental eighth notes of b,<sup>41</sup> this sudden flashback to the earlier movement, set off from its surroundings by an unexpected drop in dynamic to *pianissimo*, is nonetheless both sudden and startling. It is both an organic outgrowth of the finale's material and yet an interruption. Charles Rosen has aptly described the qualitative difference between Mendelssohn's procedure here and earlier precedents for this cyclic recall—most famously Beethoven's in his Fifth Symphony. Rather than occurring after a fermata, bringing the movement to a momentary halt, the cyclical interruption is "integrated seamlessly into the texture." "We find ourselves back in the scherzo almost without being able to put our finger on the exact point that it returns."<sup>42</sup>

The scherzo is initially heard twice, in F and E $\flat$ , interspersed with closely related material drawn from themes a and b. The spatial separation created here by the division of the eight

<sup>40</sup>R. Larry Todd, *The Instrumental Music of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, p. 292.

<sup>41</sup>This "organic" connection between the two has been pointed out by several scholars. Krummacker argues that the finale's opening material is inherently scherzo-like from the start, so that the lapse into the earlier movement, when it comes, is merely the logical outgrowth of its own latent characteristics. (*Mendelssohn—der Komponist*, p. 186.)

<sup>42</sup>Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, pp. 89–90.

Coda

Example 12: Coda, finale, first part; allusions to opening movement.

instrumental players into two quartets—one given the scherzo theme, still at its original *pianissimo*, the other that of the finale—almost suggests that the scherzo has been going on in the background throughout the finale, continually present “behind” the movement at a different level of aesthetic presence or time. This passage culminates in a *fortissimo* statement of the scherzo theme in its original key, G minor, alongside the repeated half notes of theme c with which it is contrapuntally counterpoised. After being sequenced from G up to E $\flat$ , the scherzo theme is then heard in inversion in the bass against theme c. From this, a brief passage—inspired, no doubt, by the finale of Mozart’s “Jupiter” Symphony—combines five of the themes heard so far in a remarkable display of compositional ingenuity. This climactic fusion of scherzo and finale material leads into the final section of the piece, preceded by a pedal-point of twenty-eight measures on the dominant. This coda marks the culmination of this process of cyclic recall, incorporating an increasingly clear series of references to earlier parts of the Octet.

Leading out of the contrapuntal *tour de force* of the preceding measures, the music recapitu-

lates the second and third themes of the opening thematic exposition over a sustained dominant pedal, continuously building tension that is finally released as the dominant moves down to a I $\frac{6}{3}$ . The new passage here, the first of the coda’s three allusions, seems unmistakably to conjure up the first movement without being a direct citation (m. 355, ex. 12). Its first two phrases return to the arpeggiated construction of the first movement’s main theme, specifically the passage of mm. 32–36, highlighted the second time around by the prefatory quarter-note linear ascent (371–73) that matches the eighth notes of movt. I, mm. 32–33.<sup>43</sup> Particularly characteristic are the D $\flat$  and C $\flat$  trills and the associated I $^7$  and iv harmonies of mm. 357 and 361, which recall innumerable instances of these—or closely related—sonorities in the first movement.<sup>44</sup> The soaring line of m. 363 that answers this passage likewise seems to hark

<sup>43</sup>In Mendelssohn’s 1825 version, the first movement was written in double note values, so the notated correspondence was originally exact.

<sup>44</sup>For example, see the first theme and near-identical half-diminished ii $^7$  at m. 7, or the cadential passage of mm. 34–36.

387 Finale, 8th notes of a

First movement, mm. 138ff.; Andante, mm. 1ff.;

Tonic (E $\flat$ ) Pedal

$\circ 7$  ( $\circ 7$  as substitute  $V^7/Fm$ )

391

Fm

$\circ 7$  ( $\circ 7$  as substitute  $V^7/E\flat$ )

Example 13: Coda, finale, second part: recall of rhythm and harmonic progression of movt. I development and movt. II.

back to the closing theme of the first-movement exposition, particularly in the upper appoggiaturas  $\hat{4}-\hat{3}$  and  $\hat{6}-\hat{5}$ .

Yet elements of this section may also be considered to have been prefigured in the finale. The phrase of m. 355 stems from the first movement, but it is also a metamorphosis of the cadential passage from the finale's exposition, which had itself seemed to allude to the earlier movement (mm. 137–45 and 149–65). In addition, the eighth notes of theme a clearly continue in the inner parts throughout the section, as they will until the very end of the work. In its thematic construction the coda is thus equally close to the finale and to the first movement. This equipoise might account for one of the extraordinary attributes of this coda—the fact that it manages to sound familiar without having been heard previously.

The second part of the coda returns to the world left behind in the slow movement. Under the eighth notes of a, the lower voices reiterate the same progression from the first

movement's development that had spilled out to form the Andante (ex. 13). The rhythm is the same—the three repeated half notes heard at both movt. I, m. 138 and movt. II, m. 1—and the harmonic progression—a diminished seventh functioning as C7, moving to F minor—almost identical. Again, this passage is not altogether unfamiliar from the finale, because its gestures have been echoed earlier in the A-major section of the development (mm. 243ff.). Here, however, as Vitercik has shown, the progression, which has been a recurring agent in so many of the Octet's themes, is now anchored in E $\flat$  major, the E $\sharp$  leading to ii in the violin neutralized by the tonic pedal in the bass and the harmonies returning to E $\flat$  via a diminished ii $^7$  at m. 392.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, Mendelssohn gives us the most explicit recall of all—the return of the first-move-

<sup>45</sup>Vitercik, *The Early Works of Felix Mendelssohn*, pp. 133–36.

Example 14: Final transformation, return of first-movement theme alongside finale's material.

Example 15: Transformation of first-movement theme into that of the finale's coda.

ment exposition's closing theme, in rhythmic transformation, now combined with the eighth notes of d (m. 403, ex. 14). The fleeting glimpses of past themes have become clearer and clearer, culminating in this transparent reference to the first movement in the very last measures. This latter figure (d) had all along seemed to be curiously missing something, to lack a theme of its own. The union of the first-movement theme with this passage from the finale's opening complex finally reveals that this passage has all along been the accompaniment to the earlier theme, adumbrating a harmonic progression familiar from the very first measures

of the composition.<sup>46</sup> The finale's closing theme finds its completion in the fusion with the first-movement theme, its latent potential now realized as it ties the two movements together. And this earlier theme finds its last metamorphosis in union with the finale's theme (ex. 15). By merging its finale and first movement

<sup>46</sup> "What had seemed to be a carefully controlled drive towards closure within the confines of the finale is revealed—in a thrilling instant—to be the beginning of a gigantic cadential gesture that encompasses the whole of an unusually expansive four-movement work" (ibid., p. 136).



the Octet has found a telos that is the fusion of the two.

Far more than in a simple combination of themes, both parts are here fused yet transformed into something new. The closing section of the finale contains both the first movement and finale together, yet it is neither one exactly. The music merges the two, dissolving their individual identities simultaneously and hence transcending them. The two movements, in other words, are *aufgehoben* (preserved, annulled, raised up), in Hegel's celebrated use of the term. The goal of the entire work is this all-encompassing synthesis of the separate parts of the Octet, where beginning and end are one.

The coda to Mendelssohn's Octet thus presents a recollection and summary of the journey of the whole work, an explicit realization of the music's own history, whose goal is the musical analogue of self-consciousness. As Hegel wrote, in the penultimate sentence of his famous work: "The goal, Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm."<sup>47</sup> As we have repeatedly seen, the form of this coming to self-consciousness is necessarily circular: "It is only as this process of reflecting itself into itself that it is in itself truly *Spirit*. . . . The movement is the circle that returns into itself, the circle that presupposes its beginning and reaches it only at the end."<sup>48</sup> The moment in which this self-knowledge is attained, in which the underlying idea that has lain behind all the different surface manifestations is recognized, is the point of supreme synthesis. The linear has become verticalized, the ("spatial") temporal progression fused into an instant: "[As to] the moments of which the reconciliation of Spirit with its own consciousness proper is com-

posed; by themselves they are single and separate, and it is solely their spiritual unity that constitutes the power of this reconciliation. The last of these moments is, however, necessarily this unity itself and, as is evident, it binds them all into itself."<sup>49</sup>

In this epiphanic moment when everything comes together into a unity and this unity is recognized by the music, the journey of the spirit through time is completed, and history, in some form, is at an end.

In the Notion that knows itself as Notion, the *moments* thus appear earlier than the fulfilled whole whose coming-to-be is the movement of those moments. In *consciousness*, on the other hand, the whole, though uncomprehended, is prior to the moments. Time is the notion itself that *is there* and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition; for this reason, Spirit necessarily appears in Time just so long as it has not *grasped* its pure Notion, i.e., has not annulled Time.<sup>50</sup>

Commentators disagree over whether Hegel is seriously suggesting here that time and history are completed when *Geist* comes to full self-knowledge, that is, with his own philosophy.<sup>51</sup> But the passage does seem to suggest that Time, in some sense, is qualitatively changed, whether suspended or effectively halted, when this self-knowledge is reached. When, one might ask, does this "moment" occur? Or rather, what happens when it does? The Octet is notable for continually pressing onward to some such final synthesis. But perhaps the ultimate point is never reached. As in so many Romantic works, the supreme reconciliation and integration of every individual into the whole is always imminent but never arrives. The two approach each other asymptoti-

<sup>47</sup>Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 493. See further p. 492: "As its fulfillment consists in perfectly *knowing* what it is, in knowing its substance, this knowing is its *withdrawal into itself* in which it abandons its outer existence and gives its existential shape over to recollection. . . . But recollection, the inwardizing of that experience, has preserved it and is the inner being, and in fact the higher form of this substance. So although this Spirit starts afresh . . . it is none the less on a higher level than it starts."

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 487–88.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 482.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 487.

<sup>51</sup>Walter Kaufmann, one of the most influential of Hegelian revisionists, emphasizes the provisional nature of Hegel's claims, a feature often overlooked by prewar commentators. For instance, in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel states that "every philosophy . . . belongs to its time and is biased by its limitations. The individual is the son of his people, his world. He may put on airs as much as he pleases, but he does not go beyond it" [Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 285].

cally to produce what Hegel would call a “bad infinity.” More likely, given Mendelssohn’s “classical” leanings—the desire to reconcile and harmonize, the elective affinity to the aesthetic maxims of his friend Goethe and teacher Hegel—the final realization of this process is reached in the very last passage that synthesizes first movement and finale into one. This realization achieved, the piece ends; time ceases. The “frame” at either side of the music is the annulment of time, the silence at the end of the work, the sound of eternity.

#### THE OCTET AND MUSICAL HISTORY

The process of synthesis enacted in the Octet is fascinating given Mendelssohn’s highly developed historical consciousness and his knowledge of the musical past. Indeed, one might wonder if the analogy may be taken further: might Mendelssohn’s work actually outline a comparable process within the context of musical history? Might not the “historical interest” within such a cyclical work parallel a broader attitude toward the musical past? After all, if the Octet were *fully* comparable to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Mendelssohn’s work would have to recapitulate and synthesize the entire previous course of music within itself, forming a summation and apogee.<sup>52</sup> As Hegel would demand of modern philosophy, “everything that at first appears as something past and gone must be preserved and contained; it must itself be a mirror of the whole history.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup>The finale of Beethoven’s Ninth has been read in not dissimilar fashion by Lawrence Kramer as a possible enactment of a Hegelian progression of history from East to West, from ancient Greece, via the Christendom of the German Middle Ages to the present day. (“The Harem Threshold: Turkish Music and Greek Love in Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy,’” this journal 22 [1998], 78–90.) Julie Hedges Brown has suggested a smaller-scale, autobiographical reading along these lines for Schumann’s Piano Quartet, op. 47, of 1842 (“Higher Echoes of the Past in the Finale of Schumann’s 1842 Piano Quartet,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57 [2005], 511–64).

<sup>53</sup>Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson, 3 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, 1896), I, 41. See further the close of the lectures, III, 552–53: “The latest philosophy contains therefore those which went before; it embraces in itself all the different stages thereof; it is the product and result of those that preceded it.”

Such an idea might seem attractive on a number of counts. The Octet is habitually read as the culmination of Mendelssohn’s musical “apprenticeship,” the first emergence of his mature voice in what is, like the *Phenomenology* for Hegel, his first major work. The offspring of the series of string symphonies and chamber pieces written between the ages of eleven and fifteen that move from Handel and C. P. E. Bach to Haydn and Mozart, the Octet is usually viewed as growing out of these influences of the past and synthesizing them into something unique and individual. This formation seems borne out by Zelter’s famous declaration the previous year: “From today on you are a boy no longer; I proclaim you a journeyman in the name of Mozart, in the name of Haydn, and in the name of the elder Bach.”<sup>54</sup>

The references and allusions to past historical styles seen by some commentators in the Octet—the Siciliano topic of the Andante’s opening and *stile antico* suspensions of its second subject, the Handelian fugue of the finale and the Beethovenian ambition of the first movement, the thoroughly modern (and entirely Mendelssohnian) scherzo—encourage this kind of view.<sup>55</sup> Like Hegel’s work, the Octet presents “a gallery of past images, a moving pageant of historical scenes” that are drawn together at the end into a higher synthesis. This finale, like that of Mozart’s “Jupiter” Symphony that served as a model,<sup>56</sup> seems to sum up and crown this glorious history, a trope that

<sup>54</sup>Sebastian Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn 1729–1847: Nach Briefen und Tagebüchern*, 3 vols. (Berlin: B. Behr, 1879), I, 140. This was on the occasion of Mendelssohn’s fifteenth birthday, 3 February 1824. The language used by Zelter (“Gesell”) explicitly refers to the tradition of an apprentice, having served his time and learned his craft, being promoted to the status of an independent “Journeyman.”

<sup>55</sup>See R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 151–52. Theme b in particular, as numerous commentators have spotted, bears a striking resemblance to one from Handel’s *Messiah*, “and He shall reign forever.”

<sup>56</sup>Mendelssohn knew Mozart’s work well, having first heard it in 1821 at a performance in Leipzig en route to his first visit to Goethe in Weimar (Susanna Großmann-Vendrey, *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und die Musik der Vergangenheit* [Regensburg: Bosse, 1969], p. 16). The finale to Mozart’s Symphony is already the model for the String Symphony No. 8 in C Major (1822).

was particularly prevalent at the time. As the French critic Saint-Foix wrote *apropos* Mozart's final symphony, "with a sovereign grace, eloquence, and force, the master in his thirty-second [*sic*] year gathers up all the elements his most glorious predecessors have used and reveals to us all that music has achieved up to his time, and what it will do nearly a hundred years later."<sup>57</sup>

The idea of embodying the progress of music history within the structure of an individual piece is also found explicitly in the music of one of Mendelssohn's leading contemporaries, Louis Spohr, the four movements of whose Symphony No. 6 in G Major (*Historische Symphonie*), op. 116, are meant to depict the progression of music from Bach and Handel (1720) to Haydn and Mozart (1780), Beethoven (1810), and the present day (1840).<sup>58</sup>

The analogy is deceptive, though. For it is only with great difficulty that one can trace any historical development of styles or topics across Mendelssohn's work. We start out with a soaring "Beethovenian" movement, move back to the eighteenth century with the second-movement Siciliano, and continue regressing to a polyphonic church style. To outline the matter with drastic simplicity, Beethoven leads to Mozart, to Palestrina, via Mendelssohn, to Handel, and back again to Mendelssohn. The musical order of styles simply does not match the historical chronology suggested; the musi-

cal progression is nonchronological. Whatever the Octet might be thought of in its depiction, it is certainly not the progression of music history to ca. 1825.

On deeper reflection, this is not really that surprising. Mendelssohn, for all his highly developed historical sense and the personal and cultural connections with Hegel, was neither a believer in musical or artistic "progress," nor, really, a "Hegelian" in the strict sense. The Octet's *own* musical "history," the recurrence and synthesis of the past into the music's telos, is remarkable for closely following a Hegelian process, but any wider interpretation that the internal process of Mendelssohn's work somehow encapsulates Hegel's view of history *in the broader sense* is doomed to fail. This is the point where the analogy between Mendelssohn and Hegel finally becomes strained and points to fundamental differences between the two figures and their attitudes to history. The two may have a great deal in common, but when taken too far the congruence between their views ultimately breaks down.

Whether Hegel actually believed in the idea of unrelenting progress so often attributed to him—whether he himself was quite as "Hegelian" as some of his later followers—is moot. Certainly he hoped that the movement of the spirit through world history was a progressive journey, but his views on art and on the notion of artistic progress were far less straightforward. His love for the Greeks, in common with that of many German intellectuals after Winckelmann, knew almost no bounds, and he famously declared in the *Aesthetics*, "of all the masterpieces of the classical and modern world—and I know nearly all of them, and you should and can—the *Antigone* seems to me to be the most magnificent and satisfying work of art of this kind."<sup>59</sup> (Some of Hegel's followers similarly worshipped the medieval German-Christian past, a tendency on which Mendelssohn was known on occasion to com-

<sup>57</sup>Saint-Foix, quoted by Elaine Sisman, *Mozart: The "Jupiter" Symphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 34. The idea of music history having reached a zenith (and perhaps already passed its high noon) is echoed often in the critical and journalistic writing of the time. One of the standard contemporary guides to music history, Kiesewetter, *Geschichte der europäischabendländischen oder unsrer heutigen Musik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1834), voiced such sentiments, whereas A. B. Marx contended later that the peak had already been reached: with Beethoven, musical art had "come of age" (Marx, *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven: Selected Writings on Theory and Method*, ed. and trans. Scott Burnham [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], pp. 174–75).

<sup>58</sup>Mendelssohn admired Spohr's Symphony following its appearance in 1839, though he voiced disapproval of the composer's tongue-in-cheek portrayal of the modern age as trivial and superficial, denoted by Spohr through the musical parody of the operatic style of Auber.

<sup>59</sup>Hegel, *Aesthetics*, II, 1218. Mendelssohn was later to write incidental music to Sophocles' tragedy. The role of this particular play and its importance in nineteenth-century culture is explored further by George Steiner in his *Antigones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

ment sardonically.<sup>60</sup>) But since art is one particular manifestation of *Geist*, and *Geist* is both historical and teleological, Hegel's system must make room for a teleology of art. (Whether Hegel was artistically sensitive enough to do so effectively is beside the point.)

How important the influence of Hegel was for Mendelssohn is unclear. Mendelssohn's relationship with Hegel was certainly not as close as that with figures like Goethe or Zelter, or with the family circle in which he grew up. Thomas Schmidt states categorically that "Mendelssohn was not a 'Hegelian,'" though his discussion of Hegel's influence on Mendelssohn's aesthetic views seems to understate the case.<sup>61</sup> Julius Schubring relates that Hegel's visits to the Mendelssohn house in the 1820s, as the teenage composer was growing up, were motivated more by the philosopher's love of whist than of wisdom.<sup>62</sup> Zelter reports to Goethe in a letter that Mendelssohn was very good at mimicking Hegel's manner of delivering his lectures, though again quite what this proves is unclear.<sup>63</sup> Eric Werner, however, suggests that Mendelssohn was indebted in serious ways to Hegel's views. Listing the affinities in their aesthetic outlooks, Werner cites a letter purportedly written by Hegel to Mendelssohn in 1829, in which the philosopher responds to questions the composer had put to him concerning the aesthetics of music and in particu-

lar the relationship of music and words. The former discussion is not especially convincing, being composed of general points that might be shared by anyone at the time, and the original source for the letter—unspecified by Werner—has never been found.<sup>64</sup> Others, like Susanna Großmann-Vendrey, quite sensibly treat Hegel as one of several formative figures whose viewpoints, while not necessarily matching precisely, are broadly congruous with Mendelssohn's.<sup>65</sup>

Mendelssohn was certainly not an unreserved admirer of Hegel, which in part may be due to the understandable antagonism Hegel's pronouncement on the death of art and the indeterminacy of instrumental music would have produced in any promising young composer. "It is unbelievable," Mendelssohn protested after Hegel's lectures, "Goethe and Thorwaldsen are still living, and Beethoven died only a few years ago, and yet Hegel proclaims that German art is as dead as a rat. *Quod non!* If he really feels thus, so much the worse for him, but when I reflect for a while on his conclusions they appear to me very shallow."<sup>66</sup> Much

<sup>60</sup>"One thanks God that these highly-prized middle ages are over never to return. Don't say this to any Hegelian, but it is true, and the more I read and think on the subject, the more clearly I feel this" (letter to his sisters, Naples, 28 May 1831, *Reisebriefe von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1832* [Briefe, 1], ed. Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy [Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1861], p. 154).

<sup>61</sup>Thomas Schmidt, *Die ästhetischen Grundlagen der Instrumentalmusik Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys* (Stuttgart: M & P Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1996), p. 59. For instance, the fact that Mendelssohn (perhaps intentionally) misspelled Hegel's name once as "Hägel" in a letter written when the composer was all of twelve is hardly a clinching argument.

<sup>62</sup>Julius Schubring, "Erinnerungen an Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy," in *Daheim* 2 (1866), 373, trans. (anon.) in *Musical World* 31 (12 and 19 May 1866) and rpt. in *Mendelssohn and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 222.

<sup>63</sup>Letter, Zelter to Goethe, 22 March 1829, *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*, ed. Max Hecker, 3 vols. (Frankfurt: Insel, 1987), III [1828–32], 153.

<sup>64</sup>Eric Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and His Age*, trans. Dika Newlin (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 80, given as an "unpublished letter, 30 June 1829" (a date when Mendelssohn would have been in England). Werner has become mildly notorious for the unreliability of his scholarship. A debate conducted across several issues of the *Musical Quarterly* brought the matter to wider attention in the late 1990s (see the original article by Jeffrey S. Sposato, "Creative Writing: The [Self-] Identification of Mendelssohn as Jew," *Musical Quarterly* 82 [1998], 190–209, and the responses this prompted). Despite claims to the contrary, it has never been conclusively proved that Werner ever deliberately falsified evidence, despite his numerous inaccuracies and conflation when transcribing source material.

<sup>65</sup>Susanna Großmann-Vendrey, "Mendelssohn und die Vergangenheit," in *Die Ausbreitung des Historismus über die Musik: Aufsätze und Diskussionen*, ed. Walter Wiora (Regensburg: Bosse, 1969), pp. 73–82.

<sup>66</sup>Letter to his sisters, Naples, 28 May 1831, *Briefe*, I, 155. For Hegel, art, religion, philosophy, history, and even political institutions and laws are all manifestations of *Geist*. However, as seen by the supposed decline of Greek art with the rise of philosophy (a theme later rehearsed by Nietzsche), philosophical formulation and self-consciousness necessarily follow after art has peaked—in Hegel's famous image, "The owl of Minerva spreads her wings only at the falling of the dusk" (*Philosophy of Right*, preface). Since the history of *Geist* had been philosophically formulated for the moment by none other than Hegel, art was presumably in a necessary period of decline. This was hardly going to be music to Mendelssohn's ears.



of Mendelssohn's progress would stem ultimately from his desire to rebut Hegel's "conclusions." In both his historical self-consciousness and his insistence on the comprehensibility of instrumental music, Mendelssohn may be regarded as one of, if not, the first of the musical "moderns."<sup>67</sup> As with Goethe, artistic creation, not dry, obtuse theorizing, was the critical consideration for Mendelssohn, an attitude that would contribute ultimately to the breakdown of his friendship with a theorist of similar predisposition, A. B. Marx.

In terms of documentary evidence, the case is inconclusive. Mendelssohn obviously had personal contact with Hegel, undoubtedly knew something of his philosophy, and later studied under him, but quite how far one can go in relating their aesthetic and philosophical viewpoints remains a matter of personal discretion. I have suggested here that the two do have a great deal in common, though this may be as much through common affinities in outlook and mutual interests as from the direct influence of Hegel on the younger composer. Pushed too far, the relationship becomes strained. The parallels between Hegel's philosophy and Mendelssohn's music can indeed be taken far, but at this last "historical" stage the two finally diverge. At this juncture a new model must be formed.

The figure to whom Mendelssohn's aesthetic viewpoint corresponds most closely in the matter of time and history is undoubtedly the other great figure of German culture and Mendelssohn's major spiritual mentor, Goethe. Goethe's and Hegel's viewpoints were not entirely incongruent, but they differed in several significant ways. Both Goethe and Hegel, not dissimilarly to Mendelssohn a generation later, constituted the "Klassiker," not "Romantiker," in German culture; they favored the classical and rational, distrusting what they saw as the spiritual and emotional immaturity of Romanticism. In Goethe's famous phrase, "Classicism

is health, Romanticism sickness."<sup>68</sup> Mendelssohn, likewise living in a generation putatively marked by a preference for adolescent emotions and the shallow quest for novelty at the frequent expense of lucidity, harmonious balance, and artistic maturity, was wont to complain at times of the *Pariser Verzweiflungssucht und Leidenschaftssucherei* (a particularly untranslatable phrase, suggesting perhaps "Parisian mawkishness and indulgent searching for passion") of some of his contemporaries.<sup>69</sup>

The bond between Goethe and Hegel was respectful yet guarded. Hegel, late in life, would write to Goethe in a spirit of intellectual kinship, expressing his profound debt to Goethe's example: "When I survey the course of my spiritual development, I see you everywhere woven into it and would like to call myself one of your sons; my inward nature received from you nourishment and strength to resist abstraction and set its course by your images as by signal fires."<sup>70</sup>

Goethe's relationship to Hegel was more wary. While he was broadly in accord with Hegel's "classical" leanings, love for the antique past, and distrust of the youthful Romantic movement, he was put off by Hegel's abstraction and proverbial philosophical obscurity. "Nature does nothing in vain. . . . Her workings are ever alive, superfluous, and squandering in order that the infinite may continually be present because nothing can abide. With this I even believe I come close to Hegel's philosophy which, incidentally, attracts and re-

<sup>68</sup>Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, No. 1031: "Klassisch ist das Gesund, romantisch das Kranke" (in *Poetische Werke*, II, 588). Also see the conversation reported by Eckermann, 2 April 1829, in Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, ed. Otto Schönberger (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), p. 343. Mendelssohn similarly relates a conversation with Goethe where the poet "complained about the universal tendency of the young people of the day to be so languishing and melancholic" (letter, Weimar, 24 May 1830, *Briefe*, I, 4).

<sup>69</sup>Letter to his mother, 23 May 1834, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1833 bis 1847 von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy* [Briefe, 2], ed. Paul and Karl Mendelssohn Bartholdy (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1863), p. 41. On this occasion Frédéric Chopin and Ferdinand Hiller had played to Mendelssohn on a visit to Düsseldorf.

<sup>70</sup>Hegel to Goethe, Berlin, 24 April 1825. Cited by Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel*, p. 351.

<sup>67</sup>See on this matter James Garratt, "Mendelssohn and the Rise of Musical Historicism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mendelssohn*, ed. Peter Mercer-Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 55.

pels me; may the genius be gracious unto all of us!"<sup>71</sup>

Throughout his life, Goethe remained eclectic in what he favored from philosophers, taking from them primarily those aspects of their thought that accorded with his own views. Yet he seemed to sense that he and Hegel shared similar concerns, albeit from opposing angles, and he was eager to hear about Hegel's *Aesthetics* from Mendelssohn on the occasion of his young protégé's last visit to Weimar in 1830. ("Yesterday I had to tell him about Scotland, Hengstenberg, Spontini, and Hegel's *Aesthetics*."<sup>72</sup>) For both Goethe and Hegel, the problem of humanity's relationship to time, the intersection of the temporal and the eternal, the contingent and the absolute, was a paramount question.

#### MENDELSSOHN AND GOETHE

"Mein Felix fährt fort und ist fleißig. Er hat soeben wieder ein Oktett für acht obligate Instrumente vollendet, das Hand und Fuß hat."<sup>73</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was undoubtedly a significant influence on Mendelssohn and his aesthetic and philosophical views.<sup>74</sup> As the composer wrote in 1830, following his last meeting with the elderly poet, "when he is gone, Germany will take on a different form for artists. I have never thought of Germany without feeling heartfelt joy and pride that Goethe lived there; and the growing generation appears on the whole so weak and sickly that my heart sinks. He is the last, and a

happy, prosperous period for us closes!"<sup>75</sup> Later in life, in his Leipzig apartment, Mendelssohn would keep a bust of Goethe in his composing study. The artistic relationship between the two figures, and especially the common outlook demonstrated in their work, has been the focus of an increasing number of recent studies.<sup>76</sup> I would like to look at one topic in particular: Goethe's views on time and history, and their resonances with Mendelssohn's aesthetic conceptions as exemplified in the Octet.

One of the major themes of Goethe's life work is the question of man's relationship to time, including the opposition between the eternal and the temporal and the relationship of the present time to the achievements of the past. "My field," the poet once said, "is time."<sup>77</sup> In brief, Goethe's interest revolved around the problem of human ephemerality and the search for the eternal within the transient confines of human life in a world where religious certitude was becoming increasingly problematic. As many authors have noted, this was a typical concern of the age, but Goethe's struggle with it was particularly notable.<sup>78</sup> Especially given

<sup>75</sup>Letter to his father, Rome, 10 December 1830, *Briefe*, I, 83.

<sup>76</sup>For example, Reinhard Szeskus, "Die erste Walpurgisnacht, Op. 60, von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy," in *Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft* 17 (1975), 171–80; Wulf Konold, "Mendelssohn und Goethe," in *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und seine Zeit* (Laaber: Laaber, 1984), pp. 93–110; Lawrence Kramer, "Felix culpa: Mendelssohn, Goethe, and the Social Force of Musical Expression" and "The Lied as Cultural Practice: Tutelage, Gender, and Desire in Mendelssohn's Goethe Songs," in *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 122–42, 143–73; Leon Botstein, "Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Emancipation: The Origins of Felix Mendelssohn's Aesthetic Outlook," in *The Mendelssohn Companion*, ed. Douglass Seaton (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001), pp. 1–23; Julie D. Prandi, "Kindred Spirits: Mendelssohn and Goethe, *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*," in *The Mendelssohns: Their Music in History*, ed. John Michael Cooper and Julie D. Prandi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 135–46; and John Michael Cooper, *Mendelssohn, Goethe, and the Walpurgis Night: The Heathen Muse in European Culture, 1700–1850* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007).

<sup>77</sup>Literally, "Ich hatte Zeit, mich zu fassen," a celebrated line written by Goethe's character Wilhelm Meister to his wife Natalie (*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, bk. I, chap. 1, in *Poetische Werke*, VII, 391).

<sup>78</sup>For example, see Friedrich Kummel, *Über den Begriff der Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1962). For a general introduction to Goethe's thought in relation to that of his contemporaries, see Deirdre Vincent, *The Eternity of Be-*

<sup>71</sup>Goethe to Zelter, Weimar, 13 August 1831, *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*, III, 515, this trans. taken from Kaufman, *Hegel*, p. 353.

<sup>72</sup>Letter from Mendelssohn to his family, Weimar, 24 May 1830, *Briefe*, I, 5.

<sup>73</sup>"My Felix goes forward and is hard-working. He has just finished an Octet for eight obligato instruments, which makes a great deal of sense." (Letter, Zelter to Goethe, 6 November 1825, *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*, II [1819–27], 414.)

<sup>74</sup>For detailed accounts of the influence of Goethe on Mendelssohn here, see particularly Susanna Großmann-Vendrey, "Mendelssohn und die Vergangenheit," pp. 77–82, and Thomas Schmidt, *Die ästhetischen Grundlagen der Instrumentalmusik Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys*, pp. 46–52.



the infancy of Germany's entry onto the stage of European culture and the dawning historical self-consciousness of the age, a pressing concern for the young author in the 1770s and 80s was the relationship of the new literary tradition he hoped to build with the glories of the vanished classical past.

The famous journey to Italy in 1786–88 seemed to provide him with an answer. The journey helped persuade him that the key question was one of situating the past within a living tradition. Parting ways with the efforts of the youthful *Sturm und Drang* movement, of which he had been perhaps the leading literary embodiment, the poet now began to realize the full importance of an artistic tradition.<sup>79</sup> This realization partly explains the classicizing strain in Goethe's work from the late 1780s onward, the movement away from the adolescent rebellion and Promethean striving of *Götz von Berlichingen*, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, and the *Urfaust* to a more mature, harmonious, consciously "classical" art that is not afraid to allude to and grow from its illustrious predecessors.<sup>80</sup> History and artistic tradition are conceived as the constituents of a dynamic process, each part of which is imbued with both continuity and an ongoing organic growth and development from what has preceded it, in a vision not unlike that of Hegel. In contradistinction to Hegel, however, the past, for Goethe, never is and can never be superseded.

Goethe's outlook, as Susanna Großmann-Vendrey has shown, is remarkably similar to Mendelssohn's.<sup>81</sup> Großmann-Vendrey has called attention to a letter the composer wrote from Italy articulating his views on the relationship of his music to the past. The past, he insists,

can never be repeated but only continued through an inner spiritual necessity. Any similarity between his own music and that of his great predecessors results not from "dry, sterile imitation" but from a spiritual penetration into the essence of the past and a shared empathy with the eternal truth that gives rise to this correspondence.<sup>82</sup> The paradox here, as James Garratt points out, is that in defending himself against the charge of imitation, Mendelssohn is almost directly paraphrasing one of Goethe's own letters from Italy.<sup>83</sup>

Likewise, the notion that assumed great importance for Mendelssohn is the existence of an artistic tradition and one's position as a continuation of and outgrowth from this heritage. In the conversations reported by J. C. Lobe, the composer insists that there are no completely new paths in music, only a "continuation slightly farther" down the one true path.<sup>84</sup> The series of "historical concerts" that Mendelssohn organized in Leipzig, where the music of the past was presented in chronological order up to the present day, played an important role both in deepening the public's awareness of their cultural past and in the formation of the Austro-German symphonic "canon."<sup>85</sup> Also significant here were the young composer's personal encounters with Goethe himself, in which, as Mendelssohn relates, he played on the piano the music of the various great com-

ing: *On the Experience of Time in Goethe's Faust* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1987), pp. 159–74.

<sup>79</sup>For example, see Michael Beddow, "Goethe on Genius," in *Genius: The History of an Idea*, ed. Penelope Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 98–112.

<sup>80</sup>For instance, E. M. Wilkinson has suggested that Goethe's *Faust* is the first great modern work that tries to keep the European tradition alive by constantly alluding to and recalling it ("Goethe's *Faust*: Tragedy in the Diachronic Mode," *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 42 [1971–72], 116–74).

<sup>81</sup>Susanna Großmann-Vendrey, "Mendelssohn und die Vergangenheit," pp. 77–82; "Goethe und das geschichtliche Verständnis Mendelssohns."

<sup>82</sup>Letter to Zelter, Rome, 18 December 1830, *Briefe* [5th edn., 1863], I, 97; also see the composer's letter of 13 July 1831 to Eduard Devrient (Eduard Devrient, *Meine Erinnerungen an Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy und seine Briefe an mich* [Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1869], p. 115).

<sup>83</sup>James Garratt, "Mendelssohn and the Rise of Musical Historicism," pp. 66–67. Garratt has further suggested how "Hegelian" Mendelssohn's argument concerning this point seems to be ("Mendelssohn's Babel: Romanticism and the Poetics of Translation," *Music & Letters* 80 [1999], 29–31). The two passages in question were originally discussed by Susanna Großmann-Vendrey in "Mendelssohn und die Vergangenheit," p. 80.

<sup>84</sup>See Johann Christian Lobe, "Conversations with Felix Mendelssohn," trans. Susan Gillespie in *Mendelssohn and His World*, pp. 193–94. Similarly, Mendelssohn's political and artistic views were strongly characterized by the idea of liberal "reform," as opposed to revolution (see the composer's letter to his sister Rebecca, Düsseldorf, 23 December 1837, *Briefe*, II, 72; also cf. pp. 38–47).

<sup>85</sup>On this point and Mendelssohn's historical activities in general as a performing musician, see Großmann-Vendrey's larger study, *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und die Musik der Vergangenheit*.

posers "in chronological order" so that the elderly poet could understand the development of music.<sup>86</sup>

This deeply respectful attitude to the great achievements of the past is characteristic of Mendelssohn's aesthetic outlook throughout his life.<sup>87</sup> His principles on this matter and their relation to the aesthetic idea of the "classical" have been subject to much inquiry, especially in German scholarship. Carl Dahlhaus has conjectured that for Mendelssohn certain models of composition stood out as ideal paradigms: the *classici auctores* Bach and Handel for the liturgical passion and oratorio, Gluck and Mozart for the *opera seria* and *buffa*, Haydn and Beethoven for the string quartet and symphony.<sup>88</sup> Garratt has drawn an analogy between this historical tendency in Mendelssohn's music and the idea of "translation" between the past and present—the idea of the partial appropriation of a historical style in dialogue with the composer's own contemporary idiom—to explain some of this composer's more "histori-

cist" works.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Michael Steinberg has argued that Mendelssohn's conception of the "classical" was the antithesis of the historicizing strain of thought that arose in the nineteenth century and found a culmination in the historical performance movement, that is, in the wish to situate each document from the past within its historical context, thus turning history into a desiccated archive of marmoreal relics from the past.<sup>90</sup> For Mendelssohn, the great works of the past were constantly alive, reinventing themselves anew. There is no antithesis between the classical and the modern; the truly classical is the eternally modern (the traditional *stile antico e moderno*), as summed up in Mendelssohn's words "daß alles Alte Gute neu bleibt" (that everything old and good remains new).<sup>91</sup> This attitude is demonstrated perfectly in the music Mendelssohn wrote for the revivals of Sophoclean tragedy, the settings of *Antigone* and *Oedipus Coloneus*.

Goethe's views on time and history are perhaps crystallized most profoundly in *Faust*, begun in the early 1770s and completed only the year before the poet's death in 1832. As Ilse Graham has suggested, "Faust's understanding of and relation to time is at the heart of Goethe's drama," even "the central theme of the play."<sup>92</sup> After all, Faust's wager—the linchpin of the story—is concerned with the joys of the fleeting moment and the desire to clasp hold of this, an entirely original addition of Goethe's to the original sixteenth-century morality tale:

Werd' ich zum Augenblicke sagen:  
Verweile doch! du bist so schön!<sup>93</sup>

<sup>86</sup>Letter, Mendelssohn to his family, Weimar, 25 May 1830, *Briefe*, I, 8: "Vormittags muß ich ihm ein Stündchen Clavier vorspielen, von allen verschiedenen großen Componisten, nach der Zeitfolge, und muß ihm erzählen, wie sie die Sache weiter gebracht hätten; und dazu sitzt er in einer dunklen Ecke, wie ein Jupiter tonans, und blitzt mit den alten Augen." Goethe later related the incident to Zelter: "wer versteht irgendeine Erscheinung, wenn er sich von dem Gang des Herankommens [nicht] penetriert? Dazu war denn die Hauptsache, daß Felix auch diesen Stufengang recht löblich einsieht und glücklicherweise sein gutes Gedächtnis ihm Musterstücke aller Art nach Belieben vorführt. Von der Bachischen Epoche heran hat er mir wieder Haydn, Mozart und Gluck zum Leben gebracht, von den großen neuern Technikern hinreichende Begriffe gegeben und endlich mich seine eigenen Produktionen fühlen und über sie nachdenken machen" (letter, Goethe to Zelter, Weimar, 3 June 1830, *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*, III, 338). Also cf. Karl Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Goethe und Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy* (Leipzig: Hirtel, 1871), p. 41.

<sup>87</sup>Note Mendelssohn's angry response to those disrespectful to or inclined to destroy others in order to further their own aims: "the first qualification for an artist is that he should have respect for greatness and be humble in its presence . . . and not try to blow out the great lights so that his own little tallow-candle can shine a little brighter" (letter, 27 August 1831, cited by Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image*, p. 181).

<sup>88</sup>Carl Dahlhaus, "Mendelssohn und die musikalische Gattungstradition," in *Das Problem Mendelssohn*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Regensburg: Bosse, 1974), pp. 56–60; see also Wulf Konold, "Funktion der Stilisierung: Vorläufige Bemerkungen zum Stilbegriff bei Mendelssohn," in *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>89</sup>James Garratt, "Mendelssohn's Babel," pp. 34–46. For another slant on this "historicist" tendency, see Peter Mercer-Taylor, "Rethinking Mendelssohn's Historicism: A Lesson from *St. Paul*," *Journal of Musicology* 15 (1997), 208–30.

<sup>90</sup>Michael P. Steinberg, "Schumann's Homelessness," in *Schumann and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 57–65, also condensed in *Listening to Reason*, pp. 100–22.

<sup>91</sup>Mendelssohn, letter to his sister Rebecca, 23 December 1834, *Briefe*, II, 73. See Großmann-Vendrey, "Mendelssohn und die Vergangenheit," p. 81.

<sup>92</sup>Ilse Graham, "The Grateful Moment: The Element of Time in *Faust*," in *Goethe: Portrait of the Artist* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977), p. 315.

<sup>93</sup>Goethe, *Faust* I, ll. 1699–700. This idea of the transient "beautiful moment" is alluded to by Nietzsche to charac-

(Were I to say to the fleeting moment:  
"Yet stay a while! You are so beautiful!")

Now this is especially interesting since, as we know, there is a direct connection between Goethe's drama and Mendelssohn's Octet. The scherzo of Mendelssohn's work, on his sister's authority, was inspired by the *Walpurgisnacht's* Dream episode of part I of *Faust*:

Wolkenzug und Nebelflor  
Erhellen sich von oben.  
Luft im Laub und Wind im Rohr—  
Und alles ist zerstoßen.

(The train of clouds and veil of mist  
Lighten from above,  
A wind sweeps through the grass and leaves—  
And everything has vanished.)

To me alone, he told his secret. The whole piece is to be played staccato and *pianissimo*, the individual tremolos coming in here and there, the trills passing away with the quickness of lightning; everything is new, strange, and yet so insinuating and pleasing. One feels so near the world of spirits, lightly carried up into the air; one would like to take up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession. At the end the first violin takes flight with feather-like lightness—and all has vanished.<sup>94</sup>

This piece of evidence has inspired R. Larry Todd to propose a Faustian reading of the Octet as a whole, based on the first part of Goethe's drama, which had been published in 1808.<sup>95</sup> This kind of theory, naturally, is intriguing. While there is no proof that anything more than the scherzo was connected with Goethe's play, one cannot rule out a wider association,

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terize both Mendelssohn and Goethe, whose work, too good for the diseased, *décadent* Romanticism of the later nineteenth century, was in both cases effectively ignored. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Mendelssohn—"that halcyon master," the "beautiful incident [schöne Zwischenfall] of German music"—is characterized in terms virtually identical with those applied to Goethe in *Twilight of the Idols* ("So daß Goethe . . . bloß ein Zwischenfall, ein schönes Umsonst gewesen wäre"). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, § 245; *Götzen-Dämmerung*, § 50 (*Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Deninger [Bindlach: Gondrom, 2005], p. 1095).

<sup>94</sup>*Faust*, I, ll. 4395–98; Fanny Mendelssohn, in Sebastian Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn*, I, 154.

<sup>95</sup>R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*, pp. 149–52.

especially given Mendelssohn's habitual reticence concerning disclosure of the extramusical "content" of his music. At the time of the Octet, Mendelssohn was just beginning his brief though fruitful artistic friendship with A. B. Marx, an advocate of basing musical compositions on "extramusical" literary or historical ideas, and numerous works from the following years would indeed be based on literary texts—even on two of Goethe's poems in *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt*. Perhaps the most celebrated work written under this aesthetic, the overture to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was written less than a year after the Octet.

The extent to which one wishes to take this Faustian analogy is obviously a matter of opinion, but the intimate link between Mendelssohn's work and Goethe's, together with their close artistic and spiritual relationship, is undeniable. At any rate, the connection provides a nice "hermeneutic window," in Kramer's phrase, on to the Octet.<sup>96</sup> In 1825, the year in which Mendelssohn composed the Octet, Goethe had resumed work on the second part of the *magnum opus* that had been projected as early as 1796; the elderly poet even gave Mendelssohn an autograph copy of excerpts from the first act of *Faust*, part II in 1830 (plate 1).

In this context it is hardly surprising to discover that the views on time held by Goethe and articulated by him in *Faust* are echoed in the process of his protégé's Octet. The Octet, as demonstrated above, enacts an organic, evolving spiral that is not only strongly "Hegelian" but also comparable to the broad temporal dynamism theorized by Goethe and seen, arguably, in *Faust*.<sup>97</sup> But more than this, the treatment of historical time found in Goethe's writings and above all in *Faust* is mirrored in the Octet.

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<sup>96</sup>Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 6–20. Leon Botstein has claimed in this context that we might profitably hear all of Mendelssohn's music as a "parallel to the second part of Goethe's *Faust*" ("Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Emancipation," p. 4).

<sup>97</sup>For an example of this "organic" approach in relation to Goethe's play, see Peter Salm, *The Poem as Plant: A Biological View of Goethe's Faust* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971).

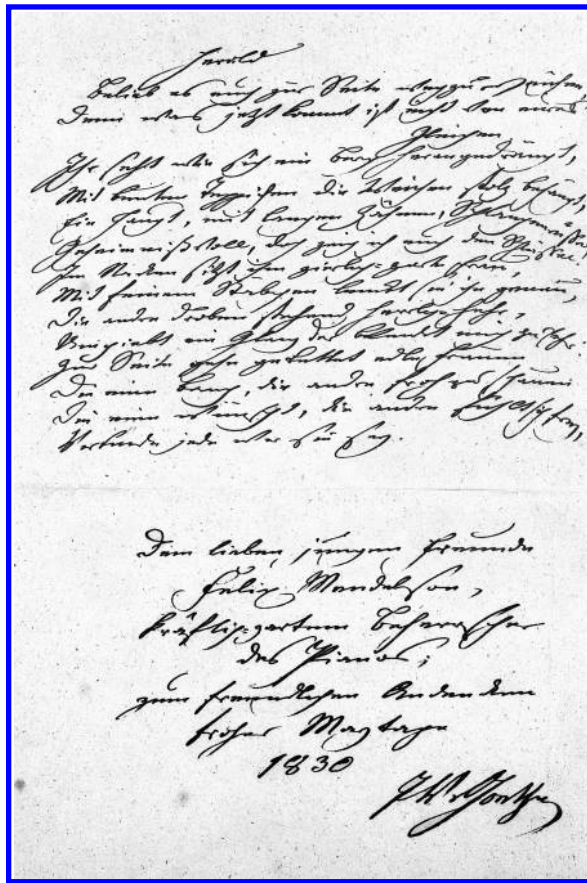


Plate 1: Autograph dedication page from Goethe to Mendelssohn, containing excerpts from part II of *Faust*. (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. M. Deneke Mendelssohn d. 8, fol. 17<sup>v</sup>, reproduced by kind permission.)

The presence of aspects of the music of the past within Mendelssohn's music should be understood in relation to the allusive nature of Goethe's work.<sup>98</sup> This incorporation of earlier musical styles, both in the Octet and in Mendelssohn's music in general, reveals the eternal presence of the past in the present, the continued validity for the present of the great achievements of history. In the same sense that Mendelssohn's work, like Goethe's before him, participates in the great artistic tradition lying

<sup>98</sup>Jane K. Brown has even suggested that "allusiveness per se is the defining quality of art for Goethe" (*Goethe's Faust: The German Tragedy* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986], p. 177).

behind it through its intertextual references to that tradition, the present moment contains and to an extent validates all previous moments by its growth from and participation in the historical continuum. To be refound, to take up its new existence in the present, the past must first become fully aware of its own historical status.<sup>99</sup> This past is not presented as it actually existed historically "but as it existed, and could therefore continue to exist, in essence."<sup>100</sup> It is a product of an unrepeatable moment in history, yet it contains the essence of that entire history, an idea that is infinitely repeatable. This recapturing of the past reveals the "higher unity" of time that Goethe claimed to have found in part II of *Faust*—the sense of the past and present as one.<sup>101</sup> But there is no sense in which the past is ever superseded. Mendelssohn's piece charts no historical progression and claims no culmination or "improvement" over what has preceded it. This is where Mendelssohn demonstrates his fidelity to Goethe's maxims and where he departs from Hegel.

The process of the Octet continually presses toward this transcendent moment of fusion *sub specie aeternitatis*, the *höchste Augenblick* (highest instant) spoken of by Faust, in time but above it.<sup>102</sup> As in *Faust*, this envisaged mo-

<sup>99</sup>See Walter Wiora, *Die Ausbreitung des Historismus über die Musik*, "Diskussion," p. 84.

<sup>100</sup>Vincent, *The Eternity of Being*, p. 39. Goethe frequently articulates the idea of the intransience and incorruptibility of the essential truth of an artwork. A good example is found in *Wilhelm Meister*, where the organic relationships that Wilhelm finds in *Hamlet* and that in themselves are timelessly valid are contrasted with the "accidental," historically specific external context surrounding this essential core (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, bk. V, chap. 4, in *Poetische Werke*, VII, 187–89).

<sup>101</sup>Note Goethe's famous account of his impressions on seeing Cologne Cathedral in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* III/14: "one feeling did get a powerful grip on me and become inexpressibly fascinating: it was the sensation of past and present being one, a perception that introduced a spectral quality into the present" (*Poetische Werke*, VIII, 401; trans. taken from Goethe, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth I–III* [Collected Works IV], trans. Robert R. Heitner [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987], p. 457). See, likewise, Mendelssohn's response to the ruins of the Forum in Rome (letter, 8 November 1830, *Briefe*, I, 51).

<sup>102</sup>Goethe, *Faust* II, l. 11586. This idea of the "moment" in music has been taken up by Berthold Hoeckner in *Programming the Absolute: Nineteenth-Century German Music and the Hermeneutics of the Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).



ment is the realization of the participation of the contingent individual with the whole. Its capacity to encapsulate all of life within the single instant of its span allows us "to adopt that perspective of eternity that [Goethe] regarded as the ultimate achievement of all great art."<sup>103</sup>

To take the analogy a step further: when Faust, in act V of part II, attains this highest moment, he dies. He thus loses his wager with Mephistopheles, but he does so in a way that transcends the wager's terms and allows him to overcome the finite limitations of human striving. Likewise, on the realization of eternity within the instant, the music of the Octet ceases. The rest is silence. In this conclusion we can see the meeting of the ideas of Goethe and Hegel. The analogy with *Faust* and the poet's views on time and history offers us an alternative—though not entirely incompatible—perspective from that of Hegelian synthesis and the path to self-consciousness.<sup>104</sup>

Perhaps the temporal nature of music, its ability to suggest an immanent unity within a multiplicity of temporal events, predisposes it to encapsulate eternity in the moment.<sup>105</sup> Goethe thought as much, and said so in a letter written barely a week before his death to Mendelssohn's teacher, Zelter: "Fortunately the character of your talent relies on tones, i.e., on the moment. Now, since a sequence of successive moments is always itself a kind of eternity, it was given to you to be ever constant in that which passes and thus to satisfy me as well as Hegel's spirit, insofar as I understand it, completely."<sup>106</sup>

This abiding idea of Goethe's—"permanence in transience" (*Dauer im Wechsel*)<sup>107</sup>—is per-

fectly crystallized in the process of Mendelssohn's piece. The eternal is represented in the finite through art. Music, with its unique power to enact the temporal states of human consciousness, can offer a glimpse of eternal unity even through its transience, and thus serve as a revelation of the hidden unity and harmony of nature in which Goethe found the idea of the beautiful.<sup>108</sup>

The Octet is not only "the first work of Mendelssohn's maturity" but also the first work in which his historical attitude is encapsulated within the music's actual structure. The "historical interest" within the Octet reveals the eternal verity of the past, not just in this one work but in the entire past tradition of music that Mendelssohn inhabited so fully. Through its cyclical structure, the Octet captures and renews its own past and in so doing establishes the model that Mendelssohn and many others would rely on in the future.



69, 440): "Laß den Anfang mit dem Ende / Sich in *eins* zusammenziehen! / Schneller als die Gegenstände / Selber dich vorüberfliehn!"

<sup>108</sup>"Das Schöne ist eine Manifestation geheimer Naturgesetze, die ohne dessen Erscheinung ewig wären verborgen geblieben" (Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, No. 183, in *Poetische Werke*, II, 502).

### Abstract.

The historical past played perhaps a more important role in Mendelssohn's music than in that of any other composer. This article approaches the work traditionally seen as his first major compositional achievement, the Octet in E♭ Major for Strings, op. 20 (1825), from the perspective of the composer's strong historical sense and takes up ideas of musical memory, history, and circular narrative journey as embodied in the cyclical structure of the piece. The Octet enacts a coming to self-consciousness of its own musical history, a process with close parallels in the writings of Goethe and Hegel, both of whom Mendelssohn knew personally. In its cyclical manipulations of musical time, Mendelssohn's Octet sets up a new formal and expressive paradigm for a musical work that would be of major significance for the instrumental music of the later nineteenth century.

Key words: Mendelssohn, Goethe, Hegel, Octet in E♭ Major, cyclic form.

<sup>103</sup>Vincent, *The Eternity of Being*, p. 38.

<sup>104</sup>Walter Kaufmann has outlined several parallels to Goethe's *Faust* in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and tabulated the numerous debts the philosopher acknowledged to his elder colleague (Hegel, pp. 116–19).

<sup>105</sup>On this aspect of music, see Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>106</sup>Goethe to Zelter, 11 March 1832; *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*, III, 639, trans. from Kaufmann, *Hegel*, p. 357. This was Goethe's last letter to Zelter; the poet died eleven days later.

<sup>107</sup>Ilse Graham, *Goethe: Portrait of the Artist*, p. 2. Compare Goethe's poem of the same name (*Poetische Werke*, I,